

NAVCA CUTS SEMINARS AUTUMN 2010

The cuts: cataclysm or catalyst?
“Change down and hang on in: small *can be* beautiful”



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Introduction

This paper is the full version of an abbreviated talk given to support a series of seminars convened by NAVCA (UK National Association for Voluntary and Community Action) in Autumn 2010. Their purpose was to share thoughts about ways of coping with cuts in public expenditure, and the impact of these on members, in the context of the promotion of the concept of the “Big Society” by the new Conservative/Liberal coalition government.

***Small is Beautiful* and The Audit Commission**

The Audit Commission was set up by a Conservative Minister, Michael Heseltine, thirty years ago, to root out waste, and promote (remember the 3 es?) *effectiveness, efficiency and economy* in the public sector. Just a few years before this, Fritz Schumacher had published his seminal work, *Small is Beautiful: a study of economics as if people mattered*. We bring them together here, to illuminate the times we live in. Schumacher’s philosophy is still very influential in many spheres, including the policies of bodies like the New Economics Foundation and the Centre for Alternative Technology. But it has not yet penetrated to the mainstream of local voluntary action.

The abolition of the Audit Commission was announced in late August 2010. Curious. Did the gamekeeper turn poacher? One interpretation could be that in the absence of factual research into value for money, political opinions are much harder to challenge, and it becomes easier for ideology to drive policy. Or the burden of proof is pushed down to local authorities, in the knowledge that they lack the capacity to deliver credible research. Whatever – doesn’t this deliver a message: no-one, not even a body committed from its inception to seeking value for money, is immune?

Fritz Schumacher's "*Small is Beautiful*"

Small, like Keats's truth, is *beautiful*? NAVCA membership is diverse. It's arguable that whilst the concerns and interests members are unified by a broad set of principles, the ways in which we interpret and act upon these depend on local factors: the geographical areas we cover, populations, generosity of main funders, and our own histories or priorities of our Trustees. Skimming through the list of NAVCA members, it seemed to the writer that there were fewer very small organisations than in the past, but it wasn't a systematic comparison. Whilst the position of this paper springs from the world view of a small local organisation, perhaps its underlying analysis is now coming to resonate more widely? However, "*Small is Beautiful*" has rather the status of Marmite. I've loved it since 1973! But it's a slogan, and like all slogans, without interpretation – *it's meaningless!*

The phrase is from Fritz Schumacher's famous book, written at the height of the oil crisis in 1973. I remember the debate provoked by this volume when it first appeared, *Small is Beautiful: a study of economics as if people mattered*. The growth economists were up in arms! But whilst Schumacher's book is called *Small is Beautiful*, it's paraphrased here to "*can be*". Misrepresentation? Not so. Turn to page 59 of the first edition and read "What I wish to emphasise is the *duality* of the human requirement when it comes to questions of size: there is no single answer. For his different purposes man needs many different structures, both small ones and large ones, some exclusive and some comprehensive". He should have called it *can be!*

Schumacher followed this by further studies, such as *Good Work*, which extended his ideas of a human scale technology, and personal organisational structures, building on Tawney's and Galbraith's critiques of industrial society. Schumacher was a philosopher as well as (or more than) an economist, crucially concerned with economic, social and environmental sustainability. He had wide influence on the green and environmental movements, the pressure for appropriate and sustainable technology, and the growth of small schools. His thoughts on the purpose of work (for which read "paid or unpaid activity") remain relevant for us today:

- To provide necessary and useful goods and services
- To enable every one of us to use and thereby perfect our gifts like good stewards
- To do so in service to and in co-operation with others, so as to liberate ourselves from our inborn egocentricity.

Small *can be* Beautiful and existentialism

So *Small can be Beautiful*, but we need to tease out when and why. Schumacher's case is a cultural one: smaller organisations tend to be more human, less distant, more in touch with users, more personal for employees, more innovative and energetic. Less monolithic

and bureaucratic, with a more flexible culture. More personal and person-centred. Productivity (don't forget, voluntary action can be seen as a production, even an art form) which is human scaled, and sustained by a positive co-operative culture. If smallness is married to political and financial independence, we cast the local charity in a mould which is similar to the small business, the freedom of action and authority to make choices strengthening motivation and energy. It's no longer *their fault, their responsibility – it's our's*.

A belief in the small, independent organisation gels neatly with an existentialist position in philosophy. The option to indulge in *bad faith* by refusing to take responsibility is closed off. Self-reliance and *authenticity* is restored to its rightful place alongside an ethos of *co-operation between equals*. The often mind numbing mantras of “partnership working” (for which one can often read, incorporation and inability to take important decisions) can be replaced by fresh impulses: organisational energy, creativity, motivation and responsibility: the buck stops here. R.D Laing introduced the concept of the *existential position* – each person's experience of the world and themselves – to understand the ambiguities of freedom and constraint. This can be adapted to understand the culture, experience and options of the small organisation. In his 80th birthday lecture several years ago, David Donnison (who has done as much to promote fairness in British social policy as anyone) quoted the Spanish poet Antonio Machado: “*Traveller, there is no path. Paths are made by walking*”. Brought up into an Edwardian world of Theosophic mumbo-jumbo, and handpicked as their world leader, J. Krishnamurti broke loose, dissolving the organisation with his now-classic assertion “*Truth is a pathless land*” – and continued to express this in his teachings for fifty years.

Personalism is at the hub of Schumacher's case, and in the woven world of voluntary action, each unique individual is a vital part of the pattern. The small organisation finds it easier to be personal, simple, low-cost, generalist, multi-skilled, sustainable, with a flat hierarchy. It can be energetic and passionate, opportunistic, fuelled by what is called “intrinsic” motivation. It can draw together paid people, volunteers, Trustees within a shared culture which embraces difference, and encourage collective decision making on-the-hoof. Charities can learn from many small local businesses, who don't spend much of their time writing plans or strategies and attending partnership meetings: the best are opportunistic, quick thinking and quick to adapt.

Schumacher makes the argument from a personal position as Quaker with Buddhist interests, but acknowledges that all faiths, or none, can be tapped to support it. We need however to remember that the small scale and personal are not divorced from the political. Whilst Schumacher develops the personalist case for small scale, he does not explore so fully the contribution to a vibrant democracy made by a diverse network of politically independent organisations. Experienced politicians recognise the importance

for our political system of an effective opposition. *Open and free debate, accompanied sometimes by dissent, protects democracy.* Every time a group of local charitable organisations merge to form a single structure and hierarchy, there is a democratic loss to the communities. Diversity of opinion, and priority choices that reflect local needs, are inevitably stifled because of the nature of managerial hierarchies: debate tends to be internalised within the organisation, contact with the media restricted to approved channels, all in the interests of presenting the desired public image. The bigger the organisation, Schumacher argued, the tighter and more controlling the managerial and bureaucratic structure, and the less significance given to local places or views. It's not absolutely inevitable, but it's what usually happens.

For all these positive and negative reasons, *Small can be Beautiful* is not half bad as a philosophy for local charitable and voluntary action, and I would argue for it long after the cows were in their byres. Adur's local version is – **Talk real people *before* culture, talk culture *before* structure, and talk *place* all the time.**

And remember – if you've never been very high, the ground's not far down!

Small can be hell

But – *Small can be hell, too!* Let's cut the slogans, and have a stab at teasing out when and why. Joseph Conrad's novels use the metaphor of sea and ships, to expose the emotional tensions, lurking traps, perils and joys, of organisational life. His short stories *The shadow line* or *Falk* could translate to a small voluntary organisation, the tribulations of managing it faced by an obdurate outside world resembling Joseph Heller's *Something Happened*.

Ingmar Bergman's classic film *The Seventh Seal* portrayed a mediaeval knight, playing a grim chess game with Death, in the midst of plague, starvation and pestilence. He was buying time for life, and resurgence, a new generation, new hopes, new ideas. Each of the seven seals on the Bible's *Book of Revelation* unleashed a new terror, and here's our seven in no particular order:

- Tendering criteria put you at a disadvantage. You fall out of or between funders' vision, your turnover is too low, your ability to handle problems too restricted, your voice too quiet.
- You get seduced by the ideology that *small means free*, promise the moon, only to be impaled on the horns of trying to deliver services that were formerly provided by all those bureaucratically top-heavy *big* organisations that we keep hearing about. *Sic transit gloria mundi!*
- You're culturally off-beam. Everyone knows big is better, more equitable and easier for funders to commission out to. Ditch the idealism and get real.

- You have a brilliantly clear vision but no resources to do anything about it.
- Your work and personal life become so bound up that you lose the distinction, your family and mental health suffer or you collapse under stress of trying to do everything to perfection because if you don't do it, no-one else will.
- Your *personal and small organisations* become the province of xenophobic, stressed out tin pot dictators, self-importantly struggling to emulate the culture and managerial style of the public sector, and submerging everyone in a sea of totally inappropriate and unnecessary governance structures, policies, procedure manuals and staffing diagrams.
- Right – you and whose army? Where's the back-up you can call on if you need it? Where's all those active community members you preach about?

Yes, this exaggerates and is deliberately contentious. But – like a boat anchored in poor holding ground with wind and tide opposed – you get the drift.

The world of voluntary action

So let's think culture and values, to start the process of teasing out when, where and why small can be *beautiful*, and how to keep the Four Horsemen in their stables. Thomas Hardy, as rooted in local culture as anyone, reflected in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* that “character is fate”, exemplifying this philosophy in the novel, and in different tone, in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. It's stormy weather in both novels, as in today's world of voluntary action. Organisations being only individuals writ large, we should be able to make the connection. For “character” read “culture”.

Let's not naively ignore *resources*, but “bracket” them for a moment, opening space for freer thinking. Schumacher's analysis focuses on technology and production, but it transfers easily to voluntary action, with a key emphasis on *sustainability, simplicity and humanity*. It shuns formulae, toolkits, check lists, blueprints and procedure manuals, and consider each issue or activity freshly, in context and on its merits. To be sure, stick within the law, but otherwise – *the wheel exists to be re-invented!* It might be argued that this thinking and learning *process* is itself of absolutely central importance in strengthening voluntary action: technology which is *appropriate* to the place and people. The reductionist ideologies of “capacity building”, “infrastructure development” and the like could be seen as singularly *inappropriate* for this approach.

Unique solutions need to be worked out in local practice, but here are two broad themes upon which to reflect. The first concerns cultural assumptions which can – should we so choose – be peered beneath and challenged. The second proposes that the world of local voluntary action is today facing important choices between clashing sets of values. Solutions are more likely to be sustainable if they are based on *unearthed values* (this

term is intended to resonate with an urgent need for the unearthing of place) and where a *reasoned balance* between alternative value sets is negotiated.

Challenge cultural assumptions

Here's some cultural assumptions:

There's an over-arching meta assumption above them all – “*we have no choice, it's inevitable.*” So you see where existentialism fits in.

- You can't reverse the trend towards bigness and centralisation. Big is efficient and cost effective.
- Users don't care who owns and controls a service. Locally managed services are just as effective as locally controlled ones, if not more so.
- Place no longer matters to most people. Who cares what anyone feels when they open their front door?
- The voluntary action world should mimic the management structures, language, bureaucratic processes, job titles and culture of the public and private sectors
- It's possible to receive vast funding from the state without being politically incorporated as a part of it

Notice that these assumptions don't provide answers. They do begin to form a vocabulary to structure the kinds of questions we ask of ourselves, as we discuss funding cuts, organisational structures, political action or – a fundamental one– to what are we anchored?

Here are some value conflicts and choices we are facing. These are not “either –or” scenarios, rather, we need to be clear where we are on each continuum– how much time we spend on these activities – and why:

- The long term hard slog building networks of personal and organisational relationships, *versus* the quick fix project?
- Delivery of public services, *versus* community development?
- Plans and strategies *versus* opportunism (or its hybrid, “strategic opportunism”)?
- Conversations with local people, *or* attending public sector liaison bodies?
- A small business *or* a quasi public sector bureaucracy?
- Another partnership *or* investment in organisational self-reliance?
- Part of the state, *or* free associations of local people?
- Paid, *or* voluntary?
- Maximise exchange value, *or* maximise use value?
- Chase the funding *or* build and follow the philosophy?

- Standardised and equitable, *or* democratic and locally accountable?
(Consider Switzerland, still with 26 Cantons and 2,600 local communes. Isn't such a model at least worth considering?)

Philosophic challenges in voluntary action

Reflect for a moment on what lies behind these assumptions and choices. They're shot through with underlying issues of power, sustainability and time scale. They're political (but not party political), rising the challenge "whose side are we on, and why?" They're buried in centuries of history: "society" in the 14th century meant companionship, free associations of people, whilst the word "state" implied hierarchy and the apparatus of power.

We're also impaled on a fundamental and devastating philosophic contradiction. But don't expect black-or-white choices from a liberal agnostic like the writer! The best philosophers have always been moved to live with ambiguity, in awe of life's essential mysteries. Voluntary action is to do with human life – not physics, not management, not mathematics, not even social "science" – and this particular hell has many pathways leading in.

One entrance is through the "rationalism versus romanticism" gateway, but we could equally find ourselves at the "logical positivist versus existential" door, the "pre or post-Kantian" portal, or C.P. Snow's "two cultures – art or science" opening, or the "Newtonian versus post-modern" something (they couldn't agree on what to call it!).

Let's cut to the quick with this (Theodore Roszak's plea against "single vision" is a good stimulus to further thought). It's to do with the assumptions we make before we do anything. Kant is really helpful here, arguing that the concepts of time, space and rationality are inborn, hence used by us to construct our image of the world. Truth is not "out there", it's partly made by each of us. Post Modernist challenges to the Newtonian view echo this more radically.

It's *time* that is so crucial in considering voluntary action. The Romantics, from Wordsworth, Coleridge, Schlegel onwards perceived time as non-linear, a joining of significant moments in life and development of a person's mind. Bergson extended this into a view of time as continuous progression, in the same way that we hear music whole, rather than a series of separate notes. There's also a close analogy with the process of psycho-analysis, the raising to conscious awareness of buried emotional connections, often separated by decades of linear time.

Now back to our local voluntary organisation and its struggles. The link between personal and organisational lives is made through time. Surely small local organisations, especially those aspiring at community development, could benefit from adopting something from the romantic view of time? And from the artistic, rather than logical positivist, perspective? People, increasingly unpaid, our raw material, are not predictable machines. Organisational histories, memories and learning are vitally important. This means: negotiate a clear strategy but **don't always** link it to a rigid timescale. Allow space for things to happen locally that could make it possible, try to be a catalyst for this, and when they do emerge – make the connection with the strategy – and act.

Shock horror! We can almost hear the output/outcome semantic pedants, Big Lottery and government offices, raving about public funds, the evidence-base, as if most so-called outcome evaluations actually proved something! Most of us enthuse for good (especially qualitative) research. But this case calls for an assertive response: *it's all about grants – stupid*. Grants, and the homely freedom *existentially to connect* as part of your community's past, present and future. **We're here for real.**

The 'Big Society' and the 'cuts'

So we come to the "Big Society". It seems clear that whilst the uninterpreted phrase is as meaningless as *Small is Beautiful*, it's no more meaningless than a previous prime minister's (much misunderstood) denial of society. Wittgenstein offers a helping hand here; consider the language game. Rather than seeking to define the meaning, we can look into how the term is being used, by its originators, and increasingly as it too morphs into a brand and perhaps policies.

But first, we need to make the connection between what we are trying to achieve, how we do it, and why – the connection between this, and a current pattern of cutbacks in public expenditure concomitant with the marketing of the Big Society. Personalism and localism cannot be taken whole, without questioning at a structural level. The Big Society bears comparison with Hilaire Belloc's and G.K.Chesterton's promotion of *Distributism*, an Edwardian attempt to restore some of the traditional liberties lost during the industrial revolution (eg widespread ownership of the capacity to produce things, especially food). It didn't challenge the kinds of structured inequalities in incomes, wealth and property/land ownership, and access to essential health and educational services, which were drawing the attention of the strengthening Labour Party, and failed to make significant progress. Raymond Williams explored similar issues, pointing out that labels such as "rural" or "urban", "local" or "cosmopolitan", tapped deep mythologies, whilst serving a latent purpose of diverting attention away from the operation of the commanding heights of the economy.

On the AdurVA Twitter pages and blogs (www.adurva.org) you'll find links to various articles, notably one by Polly Toynbee. The Sunday Independent ran an article in August 2010 "100 days, 100 cuts" from which can be extracted details of huge cuts faced by our **existing big society**, which were it not here already, someone would have to be quickly building. The Sussex Autistic Society caught my eye, with a cut which as forced their insolvency. Renfrew Libraries have lost £299,000 and my local branch library staff feel fearful. Think about it – life without the “comprehensive and efficient library service” launched originally by the Whig government in 1850? Surely this strikes at the very potential for stronger, more vibrant, inclusive and informed local community action. The challenges facing local voluntary action may extend wider than direct self interest, highlighting a need for a secure position from which to participate in democratic challenge. A recent (July 2010) report from *Social Planning Toronto* (a CVS-equivalent) makes chilling reading when it *begs* “*Don't balance the books on the backs of the most vulnerable*”. Nor should the case made here for *Small can be Beautiful* be allowed to be co-opted for any such purpose whatsoever.

So linguistically, the Big Society offers to conjure the “big” from the “small”, but the positive implicit meaning behind these words can be *qualitatively* different: either *scale* (as measured in standard units of geographical area, numbers of participants), *imaginative vision* (wide in scope, all embracing, the grand scale), or *emotionally warm* (big hearted, generous, inclusive, welcoming). These are the pluses. The minuses could *equally* link to an Orwellian nightmare of *bigness* (anonymity, depersonalisation, powerlessness, fascist incorporation of civil society into the state apparatus). It matters firstly how these words are being used, and secondly, to which social institutions and state policies they are linked. For example, can the “big” be conjured up from the “small” if local organisations are simultaneously being encouraged to become more viable and competitive by merging to form bigger structures? Or without really significant cultural change accompanied by resource incentives and tangible commitment to subsidiarity, such as the *Community Allowance* recently proposed by the Community Alliance.

Big and small. Cuts. Geography or culture. Large or small organisations. Self reliance or dependent incorporation. Truth is a victim of politics as well as war, and the world of voluntary action is not immune from marketing hype: is the ending of every lottery award or timed funding contract now to be a “cut”? Does this not simply feed the fires of a pre-existing culture of overload? As the world of voluntary action writhes in its collective seat at the very mention of such heresy, should we also be asking: are we to be “overloaded” for ever and a day, as if the option of prioritising and scheduling did not exist? Whether we hit or miss may matter not a jot if we aimed at the wrong target.

Local – think *unique selling point!*

Small offers the chance of “ungoverned space” where local people are free openly and honestly to explore their lives and needs, to develop trust, and collectively work for improvement. It offers the possibility to choose cultures and relationships that work, and space away from inappropriate bureaucracy. It offers a better chance of open public debate free from any suppression or oppression. For sure, this requires an ability to speak freely, a principle which underlay why CVSs were first established. Maybe this got lost somewhere, alongside the weakening of the original strong commitment to locality?

Let us return briefly to Kant, in relation to *local* voluntary action. The following points do not relate sensibly to the large national charities that are effectively businesses, but to local groups that actually depend on people giving of their time *because they want to*. Kant’s philosophy is grounded in the principle that each individual is an end in themselves, and not a means to others’ purposes. Idealistic? Again, think *voluntary action*: does not the very term imply Kant’s proposition? Think *voluntary organisation*, which is simply a group of people associating and acting freely, and the logical conclusion is that the same principle applies. Maybe the world of voluntary action is a last refuge for idealism – many will of course call this naive – but it’s hard to think of a motivation which can be so strongly energising and creative. It is sensible for governments at all levels to seek to use the skills of voluntary engagement and action: but to aim to control and direct these will, surely, kill the golden goose? Paradoxically, the very qualities that are routinely held up as virtues of voluntary action (responsiveness, self reliance, in touchness, creativity, flexibility) by those marketing us nationally, are denied and undermined by most policy recommendations which emerge – which focus on management structures, bureaucratic effectiveness, gearing up to compete, economies of scale, proving the pudding, endless messages about partnership working, etc. Cultural freedom, genuine subsidiarity and devolved power are so far big “no no’s” and the evidence to date is that there is unlikely to be much effort by the national voluntary sector or local public sectors to change this.

The Big Society? Maybe, but we have seen that it’ll take pushing through a lot of vested interests.

Concluding suggestions

Let us conclude with a few suggestions:-

- Is there a case for a parallel (philosophically close but constitutionally separate) structure of entirely voluntary CVS-type organisations who operate as integral parts of their communities, not delivering services, but relating constructively to the local state from positions of true independence? Or co-operative structures

enabling groups of volunteers or trustees to speak collectively and free from the fear of rocking the funding boat? Repeat question: otherwise, to what exactly are we anchored? Think – unique selling point.

- Is a strong local voice compatible with service delivery, and what would elected members think of the suggestion that the local world of voluntary action organise itself into an independent collective structure which aims to be politically honest and effective?
- Check out the website and publications of the National Coalition for Independent Action, and consider whether some or all of their ideas are relevant for your organisations – or for yourselves as individuals. NCIA is a coalition, not a lobbying or political body. It has no collective policies, other than encouraging free thinking about the best futures for voluntary action and civil society. If you like what you read (www.independantaction.net) then think about joining. Perhaps even persuade your organisations to affiliate?
- Can options for federations or co-operatives of smaller CVSs be explored, to retain independence whilst help us compete? Like the French wine co-ops; or indeed the Swiss Cantons, and 2,600 largely-independent Communes, used by Prince Kropotkin, writing in Brighton at the beginning of the last century, to develop his ideas about mutual aid, and his attack on crude Social Darwinism.
- The metaphor of the *community anchor* is impressive. Buildings are rooted in place, and there is unexplored potential for community centres to join with local CVSs and develop a fresh model of voluntary action based around supportive hubs, but co-operating and looking outwards at those aspects of local life for which someone, probably a dead economist, dreamed up the label “community sector”. The work done by BASSAC on this needs careful attention.
- Might we skill ourselves up at challenging issues at greater philosophic depth, and building linguistic awareness, so that we don’t always accept the assumptions behind the questions put to us, and respond using the same words in a different order? To the classic Zen koan “What is the sound of one hand clapping” one non-answer is “Mu”, another is “I don’t care”, and a third is “Is that so?”
- This paper is peppered with examples drawn from the worlds of literature, philosophy, movies. But let’s be clear: these are merely the writer’s (sic) *place holders*, illustrative of how each individual and organisation might draw upon their own shared understandings of life, history, literature. The argument made here concerns process as much as content. This process of deepening understanding, seeing new relationships, has the potential to salvage local voluntary action from the slough of reductionist jargon, *unearthing* both a true sense of place, and the shared humanity which the word *voluntary* implies. For me, this makes “*small*” feel quite “*big*”- *small* in the spatial and number-of-participants sense, and *big* in positive emotional connotations!

Cataclysm or catalyst – we’re here for real!

Consider retention of the the motoring metaphor in *Change Up* – even if that’s all we keep! The age is ready perhaps to consider a *Change Down*, for extra torque and slower, more sustainable horse power to power the long haul of real community development. Yes, ***we’re here for real!*** Let’s think deeply about our organisations’ responses – and our own. For the issues reach beyond role, and concern people, our society, our future, our jobs, our families, our volunteering, our individual and collective voices. Family and civil society – life. Sounds a bit like the Big Society? OK, Small World! But keep asking the questions and studying the past (there are great sources in the *History and Policy* and *New Economics Foundation* websites).

Truth is so often a political construction (consider the Iraq tragedy), and “the cuts” – the phrase is already becoming a brand – may helpfully be perceived as part “**cataclysm**”, part “**catalyst**”. We carry in our emotions the weather maps of our own organisations, peering ahead in the probabilistic art/science of forecasting, buffeted by the troughs, depressed by the low level stratus cloud and drizzle, warmed by the anticyclones and energized by the sea breeze. But there’s another way.

Churchyards, gravestones with moving epitaths, and war memorials (as well as the hill and mountain tops where many of these reflections were conceived) are great places to put the world into perspective. Ruskin’s grave, tucked away in Coniston churchyard, brings to mind his aphorism: ***There is no bad weather, only weather.*** Rest in peace, alongside all uninterpreted slogans, and those who gave their souls to the Audit Commission. The rest of us, still playing the chess and language games, hang in there, and keep trading time for the right of each place to its own resurgence.

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